

TITLE

The Take-Up of Free School Meals in Catholic Schools in England and Wales

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Catholic Research Forum Reports 2

The take-up of free school meals in Catholic schools in England and Wales

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Key findings

Free School Meals (FSM) are a commonly used indicator of socio-economic deprivation. Relatively low levels of pupils claiming (or being eligible to claim) FSM are often cited as evidence that faith schools, and Catholic schools in particular, are socially selective: privileging the middle classes, at the expense of pupils from poorer families.

As this report demonstrates, however, there are some significant problems with this practice, and with the inferences often drawn from it.

1. There is a widespread tendency to conflate actual receipt of FSM with 'eligibility'. This misidentification ignores the possibility that eligible families might not always take up their FSM entitlement. As we show, this error originates in the Department for Education's own statistics, and is then carried over into research and media reports.
2. Evidence from other governmental measures overwhelmingly suggests that Catholic schools recruit disproportionate numbers of pupils from families in the lowest socio-economic brackets. Furthermore, Catholic schools contain a significantly higher proportion of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds than non-Catholic schools.
3. There are grounds for thinking that uptake of FSM is affected by cultural or other demographic factors. The distinctive ethnic profile of Catholic schools might therefore result in low uptake, despite their disproportionate numbers of underprivileged pupils.
4. Furthermore, even if FSM uptake were a reliable proxy for eligibility, it does not follow that FSM ineligibility thereby renders families 'affluent' or 'middle class', as is often inferred.

These observations are borne out by our own research, combining an extensive literature review and exploratory, empirical research. This sought the views of parents (surveys, interviews, focus groups) and headteachers (surveys) at Catholic schools in three Catholic (arch)dioceses: Cardiff, Leeds, and Portsmouth. Our work builds upon earlier research, undertaken by the Catholic Education Service, in the Archdiocese of Southwark.

For instance, while the children of most of our parent sample were themselves ineligible for FSM, this was not uniformly a sign of wealth. Many parents, moreover, were ineligible due to their immigration status. Many also reported being in low-paid and/or temporary jobs, either making their eligibility hard to assess, or placing them just above the (low) cut-off point for eligibility.

Acknowledgments

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About the project team

Dr Francesca Montemaggi (lead author) is a Researcher at the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society. Dr Montemaggi is currently researching the welfare needs of seafarers. She has lectured in anthropology and sociology at Cardiff University. Her previous research includes ethnographic studies of evangelical Christian groups.

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About the Centre

The Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society was launched at St Mary's University, Twickenham in 2016. It was named in honour of the Pope Emeritus' role, over many years, as a leading contributor to public and academic debates concerning the relationship of religion and the social sciences. St Mary's was proud to host Pope Benedict during his 2010 Papal Visit to the United Kingdom.

The Centre is founded upon the conviction that interdisciplinary research, in which the sciences are brought into direct engagement with theology and ethics, is central to the life of a Catholic university (cf. Pope St John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 46). Accordingly, through publications, media activity, events, and attracting research students, we seek to make a major contribution to academic, ecclesial, and public debates concerning the place of religion (and non-religion) within contemporary societies.

The Centre's previous research report, *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales*, was released in June 2016. Its findings received global media attention, including in *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, Sky News, BBC Radio 4, *La Croix*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*.

Organisations interested in commissioning research, or qualified individuals interested in pursuing a PhD, with the Centre should contact its administrator, Kit Penny, in the first instance: BenedictXVICentre@stmarys.ac.uk.

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Introduction

In April 2016, the Sutton Trust published an analysis of primary schools' intake, showing that in urban areas faith schools are less representative of the socio-economic make-up of the local area than are non-faith state schools. On that basis, it argued that faith schools tend to be socially selective (Allen and Parameshwaran 2016). The analysis echoes other reports (Fair Admissions Campaign 2013; Hannay 2016) claiming that faith schools, and often Catholic schools especially, take a smaller proportion of pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds than there are in the local area. An earlier analysis by *The Guardian* also claimed that "England's faith state schools are on average failing to mirror their local communities by shunning the poorest pupils in their area". It found that "Three-quarters of Catholic primary and secondary schools have a more affluent mix of pupils than their local area." (Rogers 2012) In all these studies, significant use is made of the Department for Education's own reporting on FSM 'eligibility'. In the words of *The Guardian*, "To establish how socially representative schools are of the area, all reports compared the number of pupils in the school who are eligible [sic.] for free school meals (FSM) to the eligibility in the school's local area".

In fact, however, all these reports conflate actual uptake of FSM (i.e., the proportion of pupils who are in fact in receipt of FSM) with 'eligibility'. This is understandable, since the Department for Education's own statistics give figures for 'eligibility' which are in fact simply figures of uptake. As the Department for Education has itself confirmed in response to our request for clarification as to FSM 'eligibility' figures in their School Census data:

[P]upils who are in theory eligible for free school meals but whose parents do not submit a claim are not recorded as being eligible for free school meals.

The department does not hold information about individual pupils who are eligible but do not make a claim for free school meals.¹

This has the potential to be seriously misleading. For example, some previous studies have argued (e.g., Sahota et al. 2013) that cultural or other factors may inhibit FSM take-up among certain groups. If so, then

the distinctive ethnic mix of the Catholic population as whole², and the fact that Catholic schools include disproportionate numbers of ethnic minority pupils (see below), could feasibly play a major factor here.

Reliance on FSM uptake as a measure of socio-economic deprivation is highly contested in the academic literature (see chapter 2 for details). This is so for several reasons. In the first instance, while FSM requires parents to be claiming welfare benefits,³ they must apply for FSM separately. Therefore, parents might be put off by the bureaucratic hurdle of applying or might not be aware of the possibility of applying for FSM. Furthermore, the assumption of some reports, that parents who are not applying for FSM are middle class, is purely fanciful. It ignores the reality of low-paid and insecure work, the status of migrants and asylum seekers, the recent cuts to welfare, and the stigmatisation of welfare recipients which puts off eligible people from applying. Class inequality is a real problem in Britain and it affects children's attainment. Such simplistic analyses fail to understand the dynamics of class, the different degrees of poverty, and the practical obstacles people entitled to benefits face. For all these reasons, this report argues that taking FSM as the sole indicator of poverty is reductive and misleading.

This report seeks to raise wider issues relating to education, poverty, and social segregation by linking exploratory empirical work focusing specifically on Catholic schools with the established wider research literature. It begins by outlining existing evidence on both the socio-economic and ethnic profiles of Catholic schools, including – but not limited to – FSM take-up data (chapter 1). It then presents key academic literature on social deprivation and migration to better comprehend the challenges schools face (chapter 2). The literature provides a cultural context for migrants' work ethics and the social expectations of all parents who choose a Catholic school. This is followed by the methodology and analysis of our data gathered in seven schools in England and Wales (chapter 3), followed by a detailed discussion (chapter 4). We conclude by making a small number of practical recommendations, aimed at different groups (chapter 5).

¹ Email to Dr Bullivant from the Department for Education, 21 September 2016. Similarly in the case of the Sutton Trust report, based on data from the National Pupil Database, one of its co-authors has confirmed: 'the data is on actual receipt of FSM rather than potential to receive it' (Email to Dr Bullivant from Dr Meenakshi Parameshwaran, 20 September 2016). The SchoolDash analysis, meanwhile, is upfront about the elision: 'The standard measure of deprivation in British education is eligibility for free school meals, which usually indicates a family in receipt of state benefits' (2016; emphases added). We are very grateful to our correspondents for their prompt and helpful replies to our requests.

² On this point, see Bullivant 2016: 10, 18 n. 11.

³ The eligibility for FSM is dependent on parents receiving any of the following welfare benefits: Income Support; Income-based Jobseekers Allowance; Income-related Employment and Support Allowance; Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit; Child Tax Credit (provided one is not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and has an annual gross income of no more than £16,190); Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for four weeks after claimant stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit; and/or Universal Credit.

1. How socially representative are Catholic schools?

Using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDAC), a well-respected government measure, it is possible to compare the proportion of children from the most income-deprived areas in Catholic schools in England to the national average of all state schools.

As shown in Figs 1 and 2, based on IDAC data, children from each of the four lowest (i.e., most income-deprived) deciles are over-represented in both Catholic primary and secondary schools in England. Furthermore, 18.4% of pupils at Catholic state primary schools live in the most deprived areas, compared with 13.8% of pupils across state primary schools as a whole. 17.3% of pupils at Catholic secondary schools live in the most deprived areas, compared with 12.2% nationally (CES England 2016: 59).

Fig. 1 Distribution of pupils by IDAC Index Decile in Maintained Primary Schools (CES England 2016: 59)

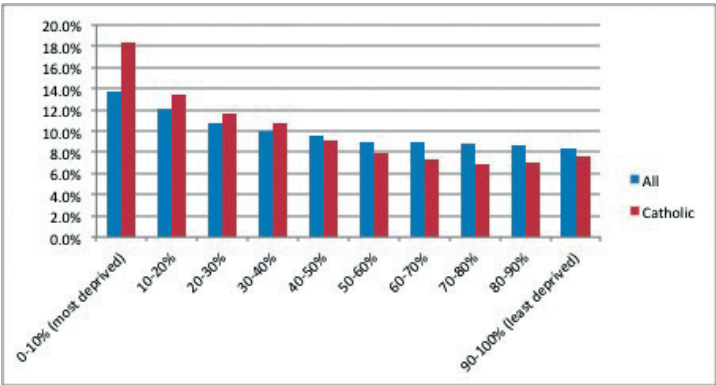
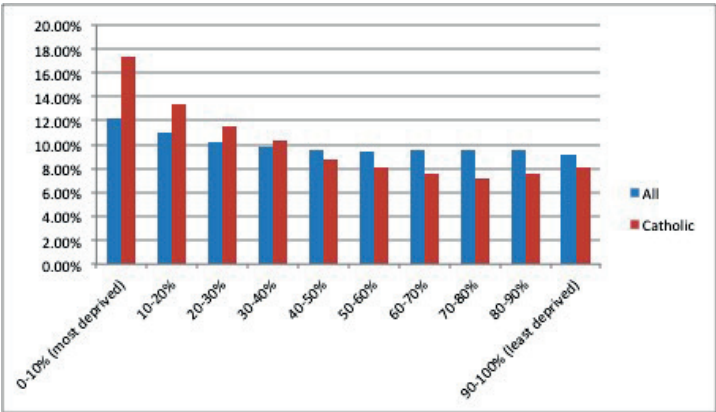


Fig. 2 Distribution of pupils by IDAC Index Decile in Maintained Secondary Schools (CES 2016: 59)



Nevertheless, Catholic schools do indeed have a lower take-up of FSM than the national average. As is shown in Tables 1 and 2, in 2015 the percentage of pupils in Catholic schools in England receiving FSM was 12.8% compared to 15.2% in all state schools (CES 2016a: 33). In Wales, 15.6% of pupils in Catholic school took up FSM compared to 17.3% (CES 2016b: 20).

Table 1. Take-up of FSM in England (figures from CES 2016a: 33)

School type	No of pupils	No of FSM pupils	% of FSM pupils
Catholic schools total	778,246	99,400	12.8
National total		1,198,494	15.2
Catholic primaries	435,559	57,308	13.2
National primaries		708,798	15.6
Catholic secondaries	316,510	39,747	12.6
National secondaries		442,341	13.9

Table 2. Take up of FSM in Wales (figures from CES 2016b: 20)

School type	No of pupils	No of FSM pupils	% of FSM pupils
Catholic schools total	29,207	4,548	15.6
National total	465,704	80,668	17.3
Catholic primaries	15,222	2,568	16.9
National primaries	273,400	49,184	18
Catholic secondaries	12,464	1,980	15.9
National secondaries	182,408	28,859	15.8

Importantly, according to data from the Department for Education's 2015 School Census, Catholic schools also take a markedly high proportion of pupils from ethnic minorities. For example, in English Catholic primary schools, 38.4% of pupils are from non-'White British' backgrounds, while the national average for state schools is 31.1%. For secondary schools, 34.3% of pupils in Catholic schools are from non-'White British' backgrounds, compared to 27.5% nationally (CES 2016: 29-30; Drake 2015). Across both primary and secondary schools, Catholic schools include almost double the proportion of Black students (9.9%) than the national average (5.4%). Furthermore, Catholic schools are markedly more diverse than the Catholic population as a whole (which is itself more diverse than the general population). For example, according to data from the 2014 British Election Study, only 82% of Catholics identified as being 'White British', compared to 88% of Britons as a whole (see Bullivant 2016: 18 n. 11).

In 2015, the Catholic Education Service carried out a pilot research project in the Archdiocese of Southwark to investigate the obstacles for parents to take up FSM (see CES 2015). Southwark was chosen due to its range of rural and urban schools. The area has also a high level of ethnic and cultural diversity. For its sample, the research selected schools that were in the lowest two deciles (i.e., 0-20%) of the IDAC Index. This gave a sample of 30 schools out of 159 Catholic schools in the Archdiocese. The survey was directed at headteachers. 20 schools responded to the survey, with many reporting that 'cultural perception of welfare combined with language barriers and a poor understanding of the process of Free School Meals [were] most common' as inhibiting FSM take-up among ethnic-minority families (CES 2015: 8-9).

The report states that:

One school stated that many parents perceived FSM as “charity” and were too proud to collect it. Another schools stated that there was a large number of children from the Tamil community where “state intervention is frowned upon and benefits are shameful.”
(CES 2015: 8)

Overall, the report identified the likely reason for low take-up of FSM as the cultural resistance to receiving welfare among parents from ethnic minorities and of foreign nationality, as well as the concrete obstacles of legal status and language barriers.

To further explore and expand upon these preliminary indications, therefore, our present research began by surveying the literature on stigma associated with the receipt of welfare benefits as well as cultural reticence in applying for public funds. This is presented in the next section. In our own empirical research, however, other factors also emerged. Among our respondents, the largest majority were not eligible for welfare benefits and, therefore, for FSM. In most cases, these did not represent the affluent middle classes, as too often assumed in the newspapers, but parents who are just above the cut-off point for eligibility.

2. Factors influencing the take-up of free school meals: literature review

Being in receipt of FSM is used widely as a measure of low parental income. It is thus employed to investigate the impact of socio-economic deprivation on pupils' attainment. Research shows that FSM pupils have a lower level of attainment than non-FSM pupils. According to Gorard, "FSM pupils obtain fewer and lower grade national qualifications at age 16, they obtain lower grades even when their lower number of entries are included and they are less likely to reach the level 2 threshold, especially when English and Maths are included" (2012: 1013). The demographics of pupils receiving FSM reflect not only social stratification, but also race.

[FSM pupils] are more likely to be non-White than non-FSM pupils and are especially likely to be Black African, Pakistani or Bangladeshi. They are less likely to speak English as a first language, much more likely to have any indicator of special need, to have been in care and to have moved schools recently. They are more likely to be in community schools and to live in areas with higher densities of other low income families. (Gorard 2012: 1013-1014)

Consequently, FSM becomes an important indicator of how children's socio-economic background affects their success at school and opportunities later in life. The rate of FSM take-up, however, is highly problematic as a measure of poverty. Hobbs and Vignoles find that children 'eligible' for FSM are much more likely than other children to be in the lowest income households. However, only "23–55% of the 16% of children 'eligible' for FSM are one of the 16% of children with the lowest equivalent net household incomes in 2004/5" (2010: 685). So only between one-quarter to one-half of FSM children were in the lowest income households in 2004/5.

It follows a significant proportion of children in the poorest families are not eligible for FSM. This is because FSM depend on parents being in receipt of other benefits that can make them relatively less poor once income from welfare is taken into account (Gorard 2012: 1015). In addition, the progressive tightening of welfare benefits' eligibility has also exacerbated poverty for those not in receipt of benefits. Hobbs and Vignoles caution against the reliance on FSM as a measure of poverty, stating that "FSM status is an imperfect proxy of low income or 'workless' families, or one-parenthood" (2007: 23). The derived national Census data offer, for Styles, a better way to gain a picture of the socio-economic background of pupils and schools' intake and would complement the data from FSM take-up (2008).

Gorard raises the issue of missing data for pupils not in receipt of FSM, but who are deprived or super-deprived. FSM can obscure those who are the poorest. This is especially the case with "more mobile" pupils. Notably, Gorard suggests that this "may provide a large part of the explanation for missing values in the maintained sector" (2012: 1010). It is therefore crucial that schools and local authorities encourage all pupils eligible for FSM to apply for them. As noted above, FSM take-up is often conflated with eligibility, and assumes that parents in receipt of benefits will necessarily access FSM. However, Gorard's research on 'missing data' suggests not only that this is far from the case, but also that the eligibility for FSM is also highly variable. FSM-eligibility is

linked to the economy. Economic downturns tend to lead to a smaller income gap, while during economic booms there are fewer poor families and thus they are more segregated economically from everybody else (Gorard 2014). FSM eligibility thus varies depending on wider economic conditions.

The levels of FSM eligibility are also dependent on changing family circumstances and are therefore subject to a high degree of fluctuation (Kounali et al. 2008). During the time pupils are at school, parents often move between receiving and not receiving welfare benefits, most often due to changes in work status (Gorard 2016). Noden and West refer to pupils who were previously eligible for FSM but whose circumstances change as "hidden poor" (2009: 4). Their parents might not receive the same benefits, but they might still be socio-economically deprived. This has led the Department for Education to employ the measure 'EverFSM6' to include pupils who have received FSM over the previous six years of schooling (Gorard 2016). This however does not extend to pupils, typically in secondary school, who have received FSM at some point, but not in the previous six years (Treadaway 2014).

Conflating FSM take-up with eligibility fails to take into account that parents might not know about FSM or how to apply, or might find having to apply an extra bureaucratic burden that leads them to put it off or abandon altogether. It further neglects to consider the level of benefits take-up across the board. There is a low take-up of welfare benefits not only in Britain but across OECD countries (Hernanz et al. 2004). The empirical research shows that one of the most significant factors determining the take-up of welfare benefits is the amount and duration of the benefits relative to recipients' financial situation. Therefore, workers on low income are more likely to take up unemployment benefits than higher-income workers. Another important factor is the availability of information on welfare benefits. It has been shown that recipients of some benefits are more likely to apply for other benefits (Hernanz et al. 2004; Dahan and Nisan 2010). Psychological and social conditions also influence the take-up of benefits. Kayser and Frick (2000) found that individuals who are less attached to social groups and more pessimistic about life are more likely to take up benefits.

In Britain, dependence on welfare benefits is often portrayed in public debates in disparaging terms and contrasted with the virtue of work. This can lead to stigmatisation of people claiming benefits (Garthwaite 2014). Stigmatisation, understood as the belief that other people might consider claiming benefits shameful (Chase and Walker 2013), has been shown to be common (Baumberg 2016) and might therefore deter eligible people from claiming benefits or have feelings of shame or lack of worth for claiming (Jo 2013; Walker et al. 2013). Research by Baumberg (2016) suggests that most claimants feel some form of stigma. Baumberg and colleagues distinguished between the following types of stigma:

1. 'Personal stigma': a person's own feeling that claiming benefits is shameful.
2. 'Social stigma': the feeling that other people judge claiming benefits to be shameful and to confer a lower social status.

3. 'Institutional stigma': stigma that arises from the process of claiming benefits. (2012: 3)

The research shows that claimants feel personal stigma, but that they also stigmatise others for claiming. Contrary to the portrayal in the media of a culture of dependency on welfare, Baumberg has shown that "people in high-claim neighbourhoods report 5.4 percentage points more personal stigma than those in lower-claim neighbourhoods" (Baumberg 2016: 192). The study also found that "people in high-claim neighbourhoods are also 4.5 percentage points more likely to think that other people feel they should be ashamed to claim benefits ('Stigmatisation')" (ibid.: 192). The association of welfare benefits with personal and social shame has destructive consequences. Chase and Walker have shown how the feeling of shame and of being shamed frame the experience of people living in poverty (2013). The dichotomy between welfare recipients and workers overlooks the growing phenomenon of the working poor, which is no longer solely a characteristic of the US economy (Levitan et al. 1993), but is present across Europe (Andreß and Lohmann 2008).

There are also cultural reasons that might either encourage or discourage eligible people from applying for certain benefits. In the case of caregivers, Scharlach and colleagues suggest that "ethnicity and country of origin might impact service use through differential cultural norms regarding family responsibility and the acceptability of utilizing extrafamilial support services" (2008: 328). For instance, research in Latino and Asian communities in the US shows that the cultural focus on the family make family members more likely to feel bound to look after older, disabled, or chronically ill family members (Wallace and Lew-Ting 1992; Clark and Huttlinger 1998; Cox and Monk 1993; Sung 1998). Family dynamics have been shown to play a role in deterring people from accessing formal services due to the feeling of family obligation and corresponding shame in not being able to fulfil it (Scharlach et al. 2008: 342; Soskolne et al. 2007; Dilworth-Anderson et al. 2002). The same strong commitment to provide care by family members among ethnic minorities can be found in the UK (Willis 2012; Ahmed and Rees Jones 2008; Adamson and Donovan 2005). The use of services might appear distant from applying for specific financial support, as in the case of FSM. However, being able to provide for one's children's meals carries important symbolic value (Weaver-Hightower 2011).

The lack of literature on the 'missing data' of those parents who are eligible, but do not apply, requires us to consider variances in applying for government funds and accessing public services depending on culture, ethnicity, and migrant status. There is also a divergence among migrants in accessing services and welfare depending on their country of origin. For instance, Dustmann and Frattini (2014) found that overall, between 1995 and 2001, migrants in the UK have been less likely than UK nationals to access public funds, such as welfare benefits or tax credits, and also less likely to live in social housing. This is overwhelmingly the case for immigrants from the EEA, while less so for immigrants from outside of Europe. Dustmann and Frattini found that EEA immigrants were "7.8 percentage points less likely than natives to receive transfers or state benefits," while non-EEA immigrants were "1.3 percentage points less likely to be benefit recipients" (Dustmann and Frattini 2014: 615). However, non-EEA immigrants are subject to immigration controls and have little or no access to public funds; therefore they are not eligible for welfare benefits. EEA citizens, who become unemployed, need to satisfy the 'habitual residence test' to be able to qualify for benefits.

There is a large presence of children of Polish migrants in Catholic schools. Eastern Europeans in the UK are often employed in low-skilled and low-paid and precarious jobs (Cook et al. 2010; CIC 2007; Anderson et al. 2006; Mackenzie and Forde 2007; Datta et al. 2007; Lewis et al. 2015), for which they are often overqualified, especially in the case of Polish migrants (Anderson et al. 2006; Cook et al. 2010). Research shows that these workers are very motivated and show a strong work ethic (Rolfe et al. 2013; Anderson et al. 2006; BIS 2015; Metcalf et al. 2009; MAC 2014; House of Lords 2008; Dawson et al. 2014; MacKenzie and Forde 2009). They are therefore more likely to accept jobs for which they are overqualified than claim benefits, and being in precarious jobs their employment status may fluctuate throughout time. It may thus be the case that a higher percentage of immigrant parents in Catholic schools would mean they are less likely to be eligible and be claiming benefits. The data gathered in this study were too limited to be able to draw a direct link between migrant parents and likelihood of FSM take-up. Further research would need a much larger sample, interviews with migrant parents on their attitude to welfare, eligibility, and take up. However, the literature suggests that there are variances in welfare take-up across different migrant groups and also depending on the time they have been in the country. Therefore, future research would also need to take into consideration these differences.

3. Comparing Catholic schools in three dioceses

The present study stemmed from the acknowledgement that Catholic schools are often in disadvantaged areas and have a high percentage of pupils from ethnic minorities and children of migrants. This gave reason to believe that there may be i) more pupils eligible for FSM than the current take-up suggests; and/or ii) significant numbers of pupils ineligible for FSM but who are nevertheless underprivileged. The study principally aimed to map the issues that might be of obstacle for eligible parents to apply for FSM for their children. The streams of literature identified in the previous section were used to help guide our research.

Our findings confirm some of the findings of other studies, while raising further issues for research based on the insights gained from talking to parents in the selected schools. The findings, however, need to be treated with caution due to the brevity of the study and the difficulty in gaining access to the schools and the parents. This is in no way a reflection of the dioceses' and schools' willingness to cooperate; rather it results from time constraints on the planning and implementation of the study, the structure of the school year, and the sensitivity of the subject. To be able to gain a more thorough picture of parents who are eligible for welfare, but not claiming, would require a much longer period of time, enabling closer and sustained contact with parents, in order to establish relationships of trust.

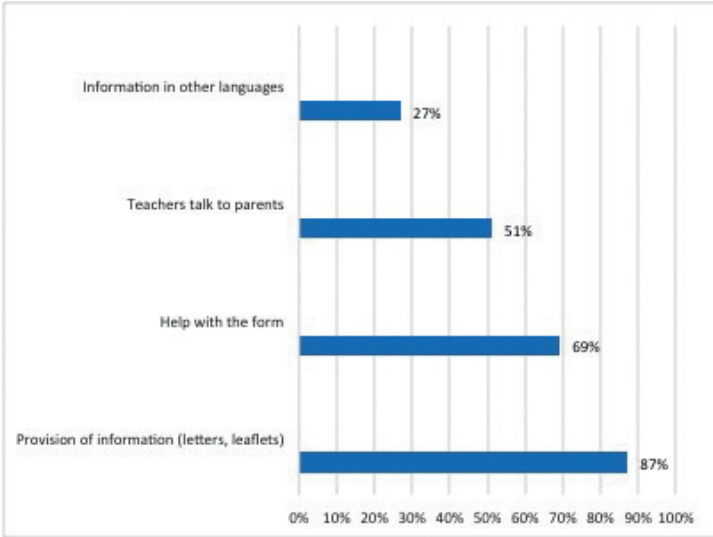
Fieldwork for this project was restricted to a period of one month, in three separate locations: the south Wales valleys (Archdiocese of Cardiff), the north east of England (Diocese of Leeds), and the south west of England (Diocese of Portsmouth). The selection of the participating primary schools and their contact details rested on the availability of each diocese to contact the schools and ensure a response. The dioceses were all very willing to assist in this task, however their own work pressures and small staff restricted their ability to guarantee contact with the schools. The fieldwork was carried out in June and July 2016 once the schools reopened after their half-term, but very close to the end of the school year. This put constraints on organising meetings and focus groups. In the end, one focus group was held with parents with 10 participants. Ethnographic interviews were also carried out with parents accompanying their children to school in the morning and picking them up at the end of the school day.

The collection of data also included online questionnaires to headteachers, and hard-copy questionnaires to parents. Given the practical constraints of the study, limited time was available to spend in each location. Future research would benefit from a longer study that could gain a better picture of the socio-economic status of parents. The data on eligibility in this report are therefore limited to the responses to the questionnaire. This is necessarily a self-selected group of parents who were willing to participate in the study. Not least, the nature of participation, which required parents to fill in a short questionnaire, would exclude parents whose English language skills are limited. This could be the case for some migrant parents, but may also apply to native British parents whose literacy level is limited. Therefore, it is very likely that the questionnaire in this study could not reach the most deprived parents.

3.1 Analysis of headteachers' responses

The research included an online questionnaire sent to all headteachers in three dioceses and a questionnaire for parents sent by the diocese to three primary schools in each diocese. There were 45 responses to the online questionnaire from headteachers. One of the questions (fig.3) asked what kind of information the school provides on FSM.

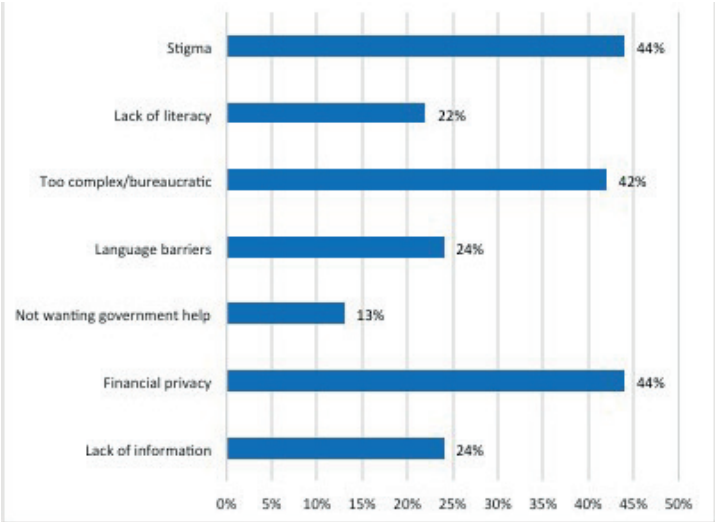
Fig. 3 Headteachers' responses to the question, 'How does the school provide information and support to parents in applying for free school meals?'



87% of headteachers reported providing information to parents in the form of letters, posters, and leaflets. 27%, meanwhile, affirmed that information is available in languages other than English. Support with the form was reported by 69% of respondents. In addition, 51% said that teachers talk to parents about FSM.

We also asked headteachers for their perceptions as to why eligible parents might not apply for FSM (see fig. 4). Stigma (44%), the application being too complex (42%), and concerns about financial privacy (44%) were identified by headteachers as the most common obstacles to the take-up of FSM. These were followed by lack of information (24%), language barriers (24%), and lack of literacy skills (22%). These findings are broadly reflect those reported in the CES' own pilot study in the Archdiocese of Southwark (CES 2015).

Fig.4 Headteachers’ perceptions of factors discouraging eligible parents from applying for FSM



Further comments backed up the suggestion that moving to a cashless system of paying for FSM reduces stigma as the pupils receiving FSM are not identifiable. One headteacher reported that the take-up in their school had increased since the cashless system had been put in place. Some schools use incentives, such as free sweatshirts and supermarket vouchers. The income threshold to qualify for welfare benefits is, however, too low in the opinion of many headteachers, leaving many, who are in low paid jobs, to have to pay for meals or provide their own. (This was also a concern shared by many parents.) One headteacher's response pointed to the fact that a high number of migrant workers are ineligible either because they are unable to claim benefits or are in low paid employment. Issues with language and literacy were also raised. This headteacher reported that the school offers support where such issues are identified. A desire for clearer information for schools as well as for parents was cited many times, in particular with regard to the earning threshold.

Another common observation was that the introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals for pupils in Reception and Years 1 and 2, which do not require parents to apply, consequently disincentivises parents from applying in subsequent years. Headteachers thought that FSM should be assessed and awarded automatically when the parents apply for other benefits. This, they thought, would go a long way to simplifying the process and increasing take-up. Such a measure was proposed in late 2015, in a Private Members' Bill by Frank Field MP. This 'Free School Meals (Automatic Registration of Eligible Children) Bill' sought to "to provide local authorities with the duties and powers required to identify and automatically register all children eligible for free school meals; to provide for an opt-out where the family wishes; and for connected purposes" (see services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/freeschoolmealsautomaticregistrationofeligiblechildren.html; last accessed on 22nd September 2016). The Bill was, however, defeated.

Headteachers also raised the issue of children preferring packed lunches as they move to Years 5 and 6 (as also did parents). When they reach secondary school, children show a clear preference for packed lunches. In this case, a better choice of sandwiches on each day might make school meals more appealing.

3.2 Analysis of parents’ responses

Parents in five schools responded to the questionnaires. In one primary school in the south Wales valleys, 23 pupils were in receipt of FSM out of 217. The school had a high proportion of Polish and Portuguese pupils. Nearly half of the pupils (94) spoke a foreign language as their first language, while just over half (120) spoke English and Welsh. 28 completed questionnaires were received from this school's parents. In over two-thirds of responses (19), parents reported being ineligible for FSM. In addition, six reported lacking information, and three needing information in a language other than English. Only one respondent found the choice of menu limited. Five respondents had applied and found the process relatively easy. This is something that can be found in responses from other schools. While some parents might be put off by the application, once they do apply, they report the process as easy.

The survey included schools in relatively well-off rural areas to ascertain whether a less homogeneous environment might discourage parents applying for FSM. Parents from two such schools, one in the north east and one in the south west of England, responded to the survey. The overwhelming majority of parents, as to be expected, did not qualify for FSM. In the primary school in the south west, 21 out of 23 respondents were not eligible for FSM, and two reported that they would have liked more information on the scheme. In the school in the north east only one pupil received FSM out of 213. Here, 37 questionnaire responses were received. In 31 cases, parents reported not being eligible, while two did not respond to the question on eligibility, and two reported lacking information on FSM. One respondent stated that they were put off by the application process, while one, who had successfully applied for it, found it easy.

The two urban schools in the north east, although located relatively near to each other, were very different in make-up. One had 80% of pupils from an ethnic minority background, primarily Black pupils at 47% and Eastern European at 30%. Overall, the school counted 70% of pupils as speaking English as an additional language (EAL). It is located in one of the most deprived areas in the country and yet most parents worked. However, these parents were often employed in low paid jobs working long hours.

The second urban school in the north east was located not far from the first one, but had a significantly different make-up. FSM pupils were 10%. Of the 33 responses received, 21 reported not being eligible, five respondents stated that they would have liked help with the application for FSM, three would have liked information on FSM in their own language, three were concerned about disclosing their financial situation to the school during the application process, and one person cited limited food choice of school meals. This school had a very active Parent Teacher Association and engaged parents. This made possible a focus group, where parents felt free to discuss FSM and their view of welfare benefits. The picture emerging from their discussion was very enlightening. It opened a window on the construction of class, the social expectations and aspirations of parents, and how these interacted with the welfare system.

Parents raised a number of issues, from the information provided by the school to the benefit system. As do many other schools, this school provides information on FSM in the form of leaflets in the 'welcome pack' parents receive when their children enrol. More information is provided in the library. The 'welcome pack' contains a lot of information so there is a risk that leaflets on FSM might be overlooked or set aside as irrelevant at that time. Parents thought that FSM should be advertised at different times during the year in case the parents' working situation changes, and in a concise but clear leaflet. The focus group's participants reported that most parents in the school worked, or that at least one parent worked making the family not eligible for FSM. Parents raised the unfairness of the benefit system that bases the income threshold for eligibility on the individual's earning rather than the cumulative income of both parents.

Parents found the benefit forms to be complex and intrusive requiring disclosure of financial details. They thought that different degrees of entitlement depending on the level of income might be fairer for all. This could be in the form of a discount rather than completely free meals, or be applicable to a restricted number of meals per week. They also felt that having more than one child should be taken into consideration for eligibility alongside income. It was clear that they thought the welfare system created a neat separation between claimants and non-claimants that did not provide support for those who might be unemployed for a short time, while creating a disincentive to work for those 'in the system'. They thought that benefit claimants, being already 'in the system', know about benefits and how to apply. They are therefore more likely to apply, as indeed the scholarship suggests (Hernanz et al. 2004; Dahan and Nisan 2010). Those who are unfamiliar with the benefit system are put off by the application process or do not find it easy.

There can be a reluctance to apply. Participants stated that parents would not talk about being on benefits or receiving FSM with other parents. However, some parents had no problem mentioning their own parents being on benefits. All school meals are paid for online. This cashless system ensures that pupils on FSM cannot be singled out, making stigma for pupils far less of an issue. Parents in the focus group were very positive about FSM and stated that had they been eligible, they would have ensured that their children had FSM. They thus felt that stigma in relation to FSM was not an issue, however being on benefits in general carried negative connotations. Some had experience of their parents claiming benefits and did not want to be in the same position. Although parents sought to avoid judging benefit claimants, it was clear that the working status was important for them not only financially, but morally. Their comments captured the self-worth derived from working and the aspiration for their children.

The meanings associated with being in work or wanting to work and raising one's children in an environment that attributes value to work and educational attainment are fundamentally moral ones. Parents spoke of choosing to send their children to a Catholic school as a way of opting for a better environment. Parents spoke of the need to 'fight' to get a place at the school. They reported a sense of significant competition: 30 places for 196 applications in the past year. The school reflected the parents' social values and aspirations. It was less 'institutional' than others in the area. It had a 'home feel'. Non-faith schools are seen by parents as more institutional and with lower expectations. Parents also mentioned another Catholic school that they thought was more similar to other, non-faith state schools. The Parent Teacher Association was active in raising funds for school facilities and in being involved in the running of the school.

The school is located in a working class area, but this should not be taken as homogeneous. The parents' own narratives drew a distinction between those who wanted 'something better' for their family and those who had lower expectations. Although they were at pains to avoid negative judgement of people depending on benefits, there was a mention of "parents picking up their children from school in pyjamas". The distinction, however, is more based on social expectations and aspirations, rather than employment status. The inherent criticism of "parents picking up their children in pyjamas" is directed at a behaviour felt to be undignified and symptomatic of a social attitude, which they would associate more with people on benefits, but would not be extended to all benefit claimants and could possibly be found among working parents. The symbolic, stock example of parents picking up their children from school in pyjamas is extreme, although based on concrete instances (see *The Guardian* 2016).

4. Discussion

Several issues make the take-up of FSM difficult, as we have seen both from this study and the wider literature. Clear and precise information is lacking. Schools often provide it in their packs (Storey and Chamberlin 2001: 2), yet eligibility depends on the family's financial circumstances, which may fluctuate throughout the year. Parents might not be comfortable approaching the school to enquire about benefits. Parents also need to know that they are eligible to claim benefits and that they need to claim FSM separately. Many people who are eligible often do not claim benefits and those who claim benefits might not necessarily apply for FSM. As people's employment circumstances change, multiple applications become burdensome. Their eligibility would also fluctuate making it difficult for them to know whether they are eligible or not. Being ineligible for welfare benefits, however, is no sign of wealth on its own. The increase in working poor should caution against any simplistic dichotomy between 'deprived' welfare recipients and 'affluent' working people.

In a study in a school in Leeds, Sahota and colleagues found that:

Head teachers felt that the bureaucracy involved in claiming FSM may deter parents from applying ... They felt this might be further compounded by low literacy among parents, particularly where English is a second language. However, they also suggested that other factors might impede the claiming process including families' desire to maintain independence, a sense of pride and their right to privacy without interference in personal circumstances. (2013: 1272).

This is something that is echoed in the present research in the responses of both headteachers and parents. Although our parents who reported that they had applied for FSM have found the process relatively easy, this might not be the experience of those who are unfamiliar with the benefits system, those who face language barriers, and those whose eligibility fluctuates and do not see the point of applying for FSM for what might be a short period of time. Welfare is also often seen as undignified and to be avoided at all costs.

In 2001, Storey and Chamberlin identified stigma associated with FSM as a factor preventing them from applying. This was due to the fact that children taking up FSM were easily identifiable. In contrast, Sahota and colleagues did not find stigma to be a problem as the cashless system of payment for school meals ensured that pupils receiving FSM could not be identified. The study reported that "For the vast majority of parents, claiming FSM was not seen as a source of stigma or shame" (2013: 1276). However, a 2015 study reported that only 18% of schools offered a cashless system for the payment of school meals in England (Vollny et al. 2015: 7). This is in contrast with 38% in Wales (Welsh Government 2013: 2). Other factors that make pupils less likely to take-up FSM are the dining environment, the time needed to queue, and the choice of food. If the dining rooms are small and overcrowded, pupils tend to prefer packed lunches to avoid queuing (Sahota et al. 2013: 1277-1278; Storey and Chamberlin 2001: 2). Pupils sometimes find the choice of food to be limited.

Although our own findings are from a necessarily limited – and likely not fully representative – sample of parents, the fact that many reported being ineligible despite living in areas of deprivation points to a low cut-off point for FSM eligibility. In conversations, parents reported being in low-paid jobs and finding school meals expensive.

This is particularly the case for parents of two or more children: again, a feature one might expect to be more common, albeit less so than in the past, among practising Catholics than among the general population. This is of significance within a context of austerity politics, restrictions to welfare access, and increased 'precarity' of work. This is also connected with a relatively higher proportion of immigrant parents in Catholic schools and their determination to be employed, even if in a low-paid and insecure job. The references to work ethic made by some of our parents raise wider issues about class and values: their values and aspirations lead them to choose a Catholic school and one that meets their expectations.

Research on parents' preferences (Burgess et al. 2015) suggests that parents mostly value academic attainment, school socio-economic composition, and travel distance. They do not seem concerned about the ethnic composition of the school or the percentage of children with special educational needs. Significantly, the researchers show that these preferences do not vary greatly between different socio-economic groups. However, they also suggest that families might want their child to go to a school with other children "like" their own, which might mean "like" in terms of socio-economic status (Burgess et al. 2015: 32).

Given the significance of class to pupils' attainment (Schoon 2006), often in the form of parental involvement (Connelly et al. 2014; Lareau 2003; Siraj and Mayo 2004; Posey-Maddox 2014), it is worth considering the ways in which schools help or hinder social segregation through admissions criteria and how schools can raise standards in challenging conditions. The wider issues of class and attainment form the context for the discussion on the proportion of FSM pupils in Catholic and, more broadly, faith schools.

The current debates on school reform should reflect much more on the wider structures of British society and the dynamics of disadvantage. If socio-economic background of pupils and parental involvement determine educational attainment (Evans 2006), further research is needed on effective educational policies and teaching strategies (Smith and Wrigley 2013; Gorard 2010; Thrupp and Lupton 2006; Reay 2006). It should be recognised that people might always seek environments that meet their background and aspirations; yet research can illuminate whether and how schools can make a positive contribution to raising the standards of education as well as parental and children's ethos (Donnelly 2000; MacLaughlin 2005).

The dichotomy between working and non-working, entrenched by a complex benefit system and a stigmatising public debate, plays an important role in segregating people socially. The rise in precarious work and occasionally toxic rhetoric on immigration sow further divisions. This context of austerity policies, cuts to welfare, and hostile discourse against migrants and benefit claimants have the potential to alienate people and prevent them from claiming benefits, including FSM, even when eligible. This can have serious repercussions on the identity of children (Sutton 2009). In conclusion, it is crucial that policy-makers grasp the complex dynamics of class and the ramifications of the ill-functioning of the welfare system. It is imperative that commentators in public arenas refrain from superficial and reductive analyses taking a specific indicator, such as FSM take-up – and even more so when persistently mislabelled as eligibility – as evidence of class, let alone wealth.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

As noted in the introduction, levels of take-up of FSM are often cited in support of the view that Catholic schools (and/or faith schools generally) are socially selective. This, in turn, supports a supposition that they must typically manipulate intake (e.g., via oversubscription criteria) in order to under-recruit students from underprivileged backgrounds. In this report we have presented strong evidence for thinking that the inference from 'low FSM uptake' to 'social selectiveness', at least in the case of Catholic schools, is seriously problematic for several reasons.

Principally, these are:

- Other governmental measures show that Catholic schools in fact over-recruit pupils from the four lowest family income brackets, and that the difference between Catholic schools and the national average is most marked for the lowest bracket. Catholic schools also include disproportionately high numbers of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Take-up of FSM is not the same thing as eligibility for FSM (though these two are frequently conflated in both government statistics, and in media and academic reports based upon them). Previous research shows that there are many factors that might discourage FSM applications among those who are nonetheless eligible. Feasibly, these might well disproportionately affect Catholic schools, given their distinctive demographics.
- A great deal of research also establishes that ineligibility for FSM is not, in itself, an indicator of affluence or middle-class status. (This was strongly supported by own research among FSM-ineligible parents.) Thus even if FSM take-up within Catholic schools were an accurate proxy for eligibility, that would not in itself justify inferences as to the allegedly "affluent" or "middle class" socio-economic make-up of these schools.

In light of both an extensive literature review, and the findings of our own exploratory research, we make the following recommendations to various stakeholders. These are primarily made with a view to ensuring that more children who might benefit from FSM might have access to them.

Schools:

- provide clear and concise information on FSM throughout the year, including orally for those lacking literacy skills.
- provide information in different languages.
- offer a cashless system of payment for school meals where possible.

Local and national government:

- make assessment and award of FSM part of the assessment and award of other benefits.
- increase the eligibility income threshold for FSM.
- subsidise school meals.
- Stop mislabelling FSM uptake as FSM eligibility.

Researchers:

- investigate the 'hidden poor' whose income and welfare eligibility fluctuate.
- investigate the cultural and social obstacles to applying for benefits.

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